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Police Prescribed Pepper Spray for Panic? Study Highlights Law Enforcement Responses to Mental Health Crises

A new study explores the experiences of individuals who have encountered police during mental health crisis.

By **Kelli Grant** - July 26, 2024

When a participant had an anxiety attack, instead of receiving compassion from law enforcement, they were met with pepper spray. This incident is just one of many highlighted in a new study that explores the traumatic impact of police involvement in mental health crises in Australia.

The study, co-produced with individuals who have lived through these experiences, reveals a disturbing pattern of excessive force, misidentification, and lasting harm. As calls for reform grow louder, the research underscores the urgent need for alternative, peer-led approaches to mental health emergencies. They write:

"Police are implicated in the systematic criminalization and over-representation of people with diagnoses of mental health conditions in the criminal justice system, as they are subjected to excessive police contacts, stops, searches, fines, and criminal charges (Police Accountability Project 2019)."

The study conducted by Rory Randall, Hamilton Kennedy, and colleagues suggests that police interventions in mental health crises often do more harm than good. By interviewing twenty individuals with lived experience of police apprehension under mental health legislation, the research highlights how excessive force, such as pepper spraying, tasering, and physical restraint, exacerbates trauma and leads to significant personal and social consequences.

The findings suggest that current practices mirror coercive methods used within mental health services, creating a seamless but damaging continuum of force. Participants overwhelmingly advocate for non-police, peer-led response models grounded in human rights and dignity. This study not only challenges the status quo but also lays the groundwork for reimagining crisis intervention in ways that prioritize empathy, respect, and the lived experiences of those in mental distress.

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Kelli has a Master's degree in Criminal Justice and is finishing a second Master's in Sociology. She believes that qualitative research methods can provide a deeper understanding of social systems and personal experiences. Drawing on her own lived experience with the mental health care system, as well as her academic training and advocacy work, Kelli aims to bring about a fundamental shift in how we approach mental health care. She resides in Kansas.